On August 4, 1975, the Iowa Department of Public Instruction named Onalee Baker of the West Central School District in Maynard, Iowa, the first female superintendent in Iowa. Although Mrs. Baker may have been the first woman to hold this position for many decades, barring those serving on an interim basis during World War II, another woman beat Mrs. Baker by almost a century. Phebe W. Sudlow was not only the first female superintendent of schools in Iowa, and possibly in the United States, but she holds the same distinction for many of her achievements during a long educational career.

Phebe W. Sudlow was born in Poughkeepsie, New York, on July 11, 1831. A few years later, her parents, Richard and Hannah Sudlow, moved the family to Nelsonville, Ohio. Phebe’s first educational experience was in a log schoolhouse, but she was soon attending an academy in Athens, Ohio. In 1846, at the age of fifteen, she began her life’s work as a teacher in the same log schoolhouse where she herself was first taught.

Ten years later, the Sudlow family moved to Round Grove in Scott County, Iowa. Phebe taught at the local school, until her teaching methods and accomplishments brought her to the attention of the Superintendent of the Scott County and the Davenport school systems, Abram S. Kissell. By 1858, Mr. Kissell moved Phebe to sub-district Number 5, as assistant of the district. In 1859, Phebe was appointed assistant principal at Grammar School Number 2 and District School Number 3. Her yearly salary was $350. By the next year, she was principal of both schools—possibly the first woman principal of a public school in the United States—and had earned an annual raise of $50. She ran both schools for six years, but then focused her attention solely on Grammar School Number 3.

On April 21, 1869, there was held in Des Moines, Iowa, a convention of school administrators and teachers to discuss current educational issues. Mr. Kissell, who was by then the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, ran the meeting, and Phebe Sudlow gave a presentation on the teaching of language, which by all accounts was well received by the largely male audience.

In 1872, Phebe became principal of the Davenport Training School for Teachers, during which time she also held the position of principal of Grammar School Number 8. Her annual salary was an extremely good $1200.

On June 19, 1874, Phebe made educational history for two reasons. She was unanimously chosen by the Davenport board of education to be the new Superintendent of Davenport Schools, possibly the first time in the history of the United States that a woman had been offered this position. Phebe listened to the terms, which included a salary somewhat less than her male predecessor’s, then replied, “Gentlemen, if you are cutting the salary because of my experience, I have nothing to say; but if you are doing this because I am a woman, I’ll have nothing more to do with it.” Phebe was quickly hired on her terms—possibly another first for women in education.

Phebe served as Superintendent for four years, during which she oversaw the construction of a new high school at Pershing and East 6th Streets (in 1909, refitted as
School Number 9, Lincoln School, after the present day High School was built on Main Street). Her accomplishm
tments did much to allay any worries about her gender; a booklet from the Citizen’s Association proudly stated that “All the public schools of the city are now under the charge of the lady superintendent, who is fully competent for her responsible duties.”

It seems odd that a woman who can claim so many firsts, and who touched so many lives, should have a first name so constantly misspelled. According to her grandniece and namesake, Phebe Sudlow’s name should never be spelled with an ‘o’.


Berry, Mike. “You’re 100 years late, fellas.” *Quad-City Times*, August 4, 1975.


